

March 8th, 2023

Education Committee

HB 6842: An Act Concerning the Establishment of a Local Food for Schools Incentive Program and Expansion of The CT Grown for CT Kids Grants Program

Molly Deegan

Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, and Connecticut General Assembly members of the Education Committee. My name is Molly Deegan and I am from Hartford, Connecticut. Today, I am writing on HB 6842: An Act Concerning the Establishment of a Local Food for Schools Incentive Program and Expansion of The CT Grown for CT Kids Grants Program and to ask for your support in moving this bill forward.

A bill like this is an incredible sign of positive changes and I am excited our state is having this conversation. We absolutely need to be supporting our local farmers and we need to be teaching our children, especially in urban places, about the many ecosystem services farms and farmers provide. I studied Agricultural Resource Economics at UConn in part due to this belief. I also served in FoodCorps for two years, teaching students in Bridgeport Public Schools and East Hartford Public Schools about where their food comes from, and why knowing about the food system matters. After, I coordinated a local food promotion program for CT Food Service Directors to connect with local farmers, called *Put Local on Your Tray!*, which still exists today, and is embraced widely by our school food authorities statewide.

The problem for me in that role was this: I always had to ask so much risk-taking from these folks who already had tremendously difficult jobs managing big budgets, labor, and meeting federally set guidelines and regulations to feed masses. It's not a small job. Most directors are extremely hardworking people trying to do what they can to support local farmers. But it takes a lot of extra work. It takes doing something different, checking guidelines, researching regulations, making new connections, nurturing those connections, thinking in new ways on prep, training staff, shifting budgets, taking on additional risks. This bill would alleviate some of the burden. It would incentivize making a choice. And the choice to me, is this: put the power of some of these federal funds into our local farms (which reinvest directly in Connecticut

communities), or continue old ways and put the power of federal funds into the corporate food industries that collectively spend billions of dollars marketing to our school food authorities each year via trade shows, catalogs, office visits and more. The school food marketplace is tilted in favor of large-scale industrial food pathways; there are no billion dollar marketing plans for small local farmers to get their product in schools. And they grow the food that truly creates health.

Please support this bill. In a time where, according to the CDC from 2017-2020, obesity prevalence was 12.7% among 2- to 5-year-olds, 20.7% among 6- to 11-year-olds, and 22.2% among 12- to 19-year-olds, I sit in the shadows disappointed that this health crisis continues to afflict our most vulnerable population and we have a responsibility to respond. Let's choose to try a new strategy and see what happens. It could spark demand for more local products and feed into a virtuous cycle of school food that looks something like this: better food, more student participation, increased revenue, better food, more participation, increased school attendance, better health, better academic achievement, better livelihoods. Cafeterias are classrooms, too.

Thank you for your time and service.

*Molly Deegan, educator at Hartford Public Schools
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